



U.S. Chamber of Commerce

The FCC's Impressive Broadband Resume and Steps Congress Can Take to Connect All Americans

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Tomorrow, the House Energy & Commerce Committee will hold an oversight hearing of the Federal Communications Commission and its work to deploy essential broadband access across the country. The current Commission led by Chairman Ajit Pai has enacted policies that have turned the tide of declining investment during the previous administration.

Private investment in America's broadband networks have enabled it to lead the world in network capacity despite the massive shift to online work, school, and commerce. According to a Gallup survey, the number

of Americans telecommuting doubled from 31 percent in March 2020 to 62 percent in April. While networks in other countries needed traffic to be slowed down to prevent collapsing, the FCC's regulatory framework for the internet helped foster America's network resiliency.

Chairman Pai's FCC not only has helped keep the digital lights on, it has also helped low-income Americans continue to stay connected. On March 13th when states began locking down their economies, the FCC launched the Keep Americans Connected Pledge working with the private sector to ensure that Americans remained online despite the ability to pay.

The FCC continues to use its administrative tools to expand access to the internet. In 2016 the FCC's Broadband Progress Report stated that 34 million Americans lacked access to broadband. Today, the current estimate by the Commission has dropped to 18 million. Since 2017, the Commission has auctioned spectrum for 5G deployment, issued orders upheld by the Ninth Circuit to remove permitting barriers to wireless as well as wireline internet deployment, and will kick off the first phase of the \$20.4 billion Rural Digital Opportunity Fund proceeding targeting over six million homes.

Although the FCC has accumulated an impressive resume of successes despite the challenges of COVID-19 and inheriting declining investment 2016, at least 18 million Americans without broadband is still too much. The Digital Divide, exacerbated by coronavirus quarantines, is disproportionately impacting low-income and minority communities.

Currently, the maps used to determine who has access to broadband are woefully antiquated and until they are updated policymakers will be left in the dark to determine where funding would be most effective to connect the unserved. Earlier this year Congress passed and the President signed into law the Broadband DATA Act which is designed to improve broadband mapping. Unfortunately, Congress has left the FCC without an estimated \$65 million in resources needed in the first year to fulfill its duties under the new mapping directive. This cost pales in comparison to the potential billions of dollars in benefits for connecting rural American to digital tools. It is for this reason the Chamber sent a letter to Congress last week calling for mapping appropriations in addition to support for students lacking connectivity for virtual classrooms.

The Federal Communications Commission can only do so much with its authority to bridge the Digital Divide. It's now time for Congress to step up and provide for urgent short-term needs like funding broadband mapping and helping disconnected students. Such necessary steps will equip Congress to meet the task of undertaking a robust national strategy to connect all Americans.

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